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## Talk of Gas Drilling Splits Pro-Bush Factions in West

By Blaine Harden  
 Washington Post Staff Writer  
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CHOTEAU, Mont. -- The Great Plains smack into the Rockies just west of here. The collision of flatness and verticality results in the Rocky Mountain Front, the only place in the West where large numbers of grizzlies, elk and bighorn sheep still wander down out of the mountains and take their leisure on the grassy plain.

Seven years ago, the U.S. Forest Service ruled that the Front deserved "special attention" and halted new oil and gas leasing. Hunters, hikers and assorted lovers of this 100-mile-long stretch of wilderness breathed a collective sigh of relief.

A long fight between energy extraction and wildlife protection seemed over. The bears and the elk had apparently won, with the help of national conservation and hunting groups, as well as a majority of Montanans, who told pollsters this place should be left alone.

But now, with natural gas prices up sharply and with President Bush making domestic energy production a national security priority, the fight over the Front is back on. Although the Forest Service's ban on new leases remains in effect, the Bureau of Land Management is reviewing plans by three companies with existing leases to extract gas from eight wells. If they find significant amounts of gas, there will almost certainly be many more new wells, plus roads, pipelines and processing plants.

Rumbles of renewed resource extraction along the Front are echoing across the country -- with prime hunting and fishing habitat coming under threat in the federal forests, plains and wetlands of Alaska, Wyoming, Idaho, Colorado, South Dakota, New Mexico and elsewhere. The gathering din has begun to worry -- and, in some cases, infuriate -- America's fishermen and hunters, many of whom are Republicans who voted for Bush. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates about 47 million Americans fish or hunt.

"This is a community that is slow to anger, but once they get lit it is a real hot burn," said Chris Woods, conservation director for Trout Unlimited, which has 130,000 members, 64 percent of whom say they are Republicans. "You are seeing this now on the Rocky Mountain Front. This is one of the Holy Grail places."

When it comes to politics, a long-standing lament among American sportsmen is that Democrats want your guns and Republicans want your land.

Leaders of the country's major fishing and hunting organizations agree that concern about gun-control laws was a key factor in their members' support for Bush in the last election. Yet, with the exception of

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the National Rifle Association, these leaders say they are hearing from members upset about what the Bush administration is doing to federal land.

"While many of them vote gun rights first and conservation second, many do not," said Paul Hansen, executive director of the Izaak Walton League, which has 50,000 members, 80 percent of whom describe themselves as Republicans or independents. "I think the administration is making a big mistake if they are taking this electoral group for granted."

The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, an umbrella group for many hunting, fishing and conservation groups, is hearing angry questions from around the country.



"Sportsmen look to us to tell them what this administration is doing for hunters and fishermen," said George Cooper, a spokesman for the partnership. "We don't have much good news to give them. It is hard to quantify, but I would certainly say there is concern and growing frustration."

The National Rifle Association, though, said its 4 million members are neither upset nor asking questions about federal land use under Bush.



"Preservation of hunting habitat is always a concern, but we have not heard any communication from our members on this matter," spokesman Andrew Arulanandam said. He said the dominant issues are getting rid of gun laws passed in the Clinton era and lobbying Congress to pass a law protecting gunmakers from lawsuits.

The NRA seems alone among major gun groups in not hearing at least some grumbling from members about administration land policies. Even groups that declined to comment publicly on the administration's policies, such as the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the Boone and Crockett Club, said energy exploration on prime hunting turf is a major source of debate and worry.

About 450 gun clubs across the United States -- including 49 combat handgun clubs -- have signed a petition objecting to the administration's proposal to remove the Tongass National Forest in southeast Alaska from the protection of a Clinton-era rule that bans new roads in undeveloped parts of the forest. The Tongass contains perhaps the world's premier salmon fisheries and is a favorite site for high-end big-game hunting.

"The Tongass is a gold mine for sportsman," the petition said. "Given the extraordinary values of this region, it was surprising and disappointing, to see the Department of Agriculture proposing to remove the Tongass" from the roadless rule.

The petition was mailed last week to Dale Bosworth, chief of the Forest Service, from the Northern Sportsman Network, an Alaskan group of hunters, fishermen, outdoor guides and religious leaders.

The Mule Deer Foundation is one of many hunting groups objecting to the administration's push to accelerate coal-bed methane drilling in Wyoming and New Mexico. The drilling technique, which

pumps water out of shallow aquifers to get at methane trapped in coal seams, has laced vast tracts of Wyoming -- including prime deer-hunting land -- with roads, wastewater pits, power lines and noisy compressor stations.

"Remove the best habitat from 8 million acres and deny its use to 150,000 mule deer, and you have some idea of the potential impact of uncontrolled CBM [coal-bed methane] development in northern Wyoming," Dale Ackels wrote in the foundation's magazine, *Mule Deer*.

In South Dakota, many bird hunters are upset by the administration's retreat from a federal program of buying conservation easements on wetlands that are prime habitat for migrating ducks.

Tony Dean, host and producer of a popular outdoors television show, has accused the administration of undermining a conservation program that is good for birds, farmers and hunters.

"Saying you're the friend of sportsmen because you support gun ownership, while using it to hide the dismantling of America's conservation policies, is patently dishonest," Dean wrote recently in *Outdoors Unlimited*, a publication of the Outdoor Writers of America.

As much as any wildlife habitat in the West, the Rocky Mountain Front is an instructive place to observe the collision between the administration's energy policy and the passions of the nation's major hunting and conservation groups.

The Front is the gateway from the Great Plains to the largest cluster of protected wilderness in the lower 48. The region abuts a 2 million-acre swath of mountains stretching south from Glacier National Park down through three designated wilderness areas to the outskirts of Helena, Montana's capital.

The land along the Front is a patchwork of federal, state and private ownership, and very little of it has an official wilderness designation. But boundaries and designations have little influence on large seasonal migrations of big game.

Grizzly and brown bears, the country's second-largest herd of elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, wolves, mountain goats, the country's largest herd of bighorn sheep, bobcats, lynx, wolverines, and coyotes all venture out of the high country into the foothills and plains along the Front at various times of the year.

The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks classifies the Front as a part of the top 1 percent of wildlife habitat in the United States. The only major big-game animal not still present in large numbers is the buffalo, which was hunted to near-extinction in the late 1800s.

Starting in 1913, when the first private game reserve was established, hunting and conservation groups have tried to protect the animals that remain. In almost every way, they have succeeded.

"The Front is one of the most impressive conservation stories in America," said Jim Posewitz, director of Orion the Hunter's Institute, an organization in Helena that teaches the history and ethics of hunting.

One severely disruptive interloper that the Front has not had to be protected from is the subdivision. The weather here is reliably horrible: cold and windy, hot and windy, snow and windy. The wind routinely blows railroad cars off tracks.

This is not a part of Montana where wealthy people build trophy homes. (One exception is David Letterman, the talk show host, whose ranch house near the Front was recently busted up by a black

bear.) In recent decades and at a quickening pace, Montana hunting groups, along with the Nature Conservancy and the Boone and Crockett Club, have bought a number of large tracts of land and set them aside for wildlife. In 1972, the Scapegoat Wilderness area, which abuts the Front, was the first federal wilderness in the country to be created as a result of local citizen initiative.

"What doesn't fit into this picture is oil and gas development," Posewitz said. "It cannot come lightly into a wild landscape."

The energy industry says that argument is flat wrong.

"We aren't going to screw up the land," said Gail Abercrombie, executive director of the Montana Petroleum Association. "The grizzly bears and elk will be there with natural gas production. It is not one or the other. We will have both."

But the recent history of the oil and gas industry in the Rocky Mountain West does not inspire trust, according to the Montana Wildlife Federation, an umbrella group for 25 hunting clubs in this state. The organization points to environmental damage done by gas drilling in northern Wyoming, as well as to large-scale gas drilling in Canada on a stretch of land similar to the Front.

"It is not as if our members have taken a position against the Bush administration or the Republican Party, but when it comes to the Front they just want to keep industry out," said Nathan Birkeland, a spokesman for the federation, which is the state's largest hunting group.

What concerns many local hunters and national conservation groups is the relatively small amount of gas the government estimates can be extracted from the Front. According to a Bureau of Land Management document released last year, the amount of recoverable gas is 14 billion to 106 billion cubic feet. That is a few days' worth of national gas consumption, which now runs at an annual rate of about 22.5 trillion cubic feet.

The Montana Petroleum Association counters that although relatively small gas fields may seem insignificant, they can add up to a major role in addressing the country's energy shortage.

"No single place in this country can provide all of the natural gas we need," Abercrombie said. "It will take all the various sources."

Still, many people who live along the Front, along with several national hunting groups, question why one of those relatively small sources has to be a premier wildlife habitat.

"To me, it doesn't make sense," said Carl Rappold, 51, a rancher on the Front who has always voted Republican but said he will not vote again for Bush. "We got all these species clustered in a little bit of space. It is almost like a last stand. And now we are going to develop it for a handful of gas?"

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